

Federal Judicial Center
Executive Edge Episode 11
Leadership Blind Spots
Interview with Brian Brandt

Lori Murphy: Hello. I'm Lori Murphy, assistant division director for Executive Education at the Federal Judicial Center. Welcome to *Executive Edge*, a podcast focused on executive leadership in the federal judiciary.

In today's episode, we'll discuss leadership blind spots, why we all have them, how we can figure out which ones we have, and how we can deal with them once we're aware of them. Leadership blind spots are behaviors, attitudes or habits that we don't know about ourselves and they can prevent us from leading effectively.

We're talking today with Brian Brandt, CEO of Core Insights - a Texas-based company providing training, strategic guidance, and coaching. His passion is developing strong leaders and organizations. Brian speaks and writes about various leadership topics. He's regularly interviewed by radio, television, and print media outlets. Brian is the co-author of the book, *Blind Spots: What You Don't Know Can Hurt You*. He and his co-author, Ashley Kutach, argue that leaders can be more effective by discovering and addressing their blind spots.

Our host for today's episode is my colleague, Michael Siegel, Senior Education Specialist for Executive Education at the Federal Judicial Center. Michael, take it away.

Michael Siegel: Thanks Lori. Brian, thanks for joining us.

Brian Brandt: Thanks, Michael. I appreciate the opportunity.

Michael Siegel: It's great to have you. Tell us, what are blind spots and why can they present problems for leaders?

Brian Brandt: Well, in simplest terms, blind spots are those things that others know about us but we don't know about ourselves. For leaders, if we don't really know ourselves - the good and the bad - then we're really not able to lead ourselves, much less others in our organizations or our volunteer roles or even in our families.

Michael Siegel: And it's hard to get to know ourselves as well as others know us, isn't it?

Brian Brandt: It sure can be, yes.

Michael Siegel: So it can be costly when leaders are blind to their weaknesses, how so?

Brian Brandt: Absolutely. This is really why we created the training initially and ultimately wrote the book. When we're not aware of certain issues with such things as our communication, our leadership, or even our mannerisms, the

ramifications can be significant. It can be costly to our organizations through such things as ineffectiveness, low morale, and even high turnover.

But for one's career, it can be highly detrimental as we fail to get appointments, positions or promotions that we are otherwise prepared for. It's not hard for people with similar experience in education to receive a position because they have a higher degree of emotional intelligence. So for example, somebody may get a position and they may even have less education or experience but because of the way they connect with others or because of their awareness and their constant growth, they actually might even get better recommendations and better preferences and better opportunities. But realistically, in all of our relationships, it can be the difference between thriving, survival and even failure.

I was leading a training recently when one of the participants, a bailiff, he looked at me oddly during one of the segments. And I asked him to explain what he was thinking because his non-verbal communication was telling me something but I didn't know what. He said, well, that would have been nice to know four marriages ago. And so obviously, there is that aspect, Michael, where you know he was just completely unaware of something but because of some of the elements of that training, he recognized some things. You know, he was making a

little fun at it there but it was true. Oddly enough, the next week I noticed on his Facebook page that he got married again. It was his fifth marriage and certainly I'm hoping some of our training took hold in this relationship. There's definitely a cost to not being vigilant to looking for blind spots for each and every one of us.

Michael Siegel: Absolutely. On the other hand, leaders may also be blind to some of their strengths. How can this be a problem?

Brian Brandt: Well, this is one that I see a lot when I get into executive coaching relationships and I'm really able to go deeper with people. I was recently conducting 360 reviews with senior leaders of a department. As I sat down with the senior member of that department, the way he had rated himself in the area of trust was significantly lower than the rating every other stakeholder had given him. So he really had this high level of trust with people but he didn't recognize that. And so because of not understanding that strength, he wasn't leveraging it to the benefit of his department or his organization.

That needed to be utilized to further their initiatives, but they weren't because it was a blind spot. That was a strength of his, but it was still a blind spot. Because of that, they weren't really getting all of the power that they

could out of that leader specifically with that organization. So we all need to be aware of our strengths and how we can use those for good.

Michael Siegel: That's really interesting. We used to do and still do 360-degree feedback in the federal judiciary. We found over the years that many court executives rate themselves lower than their employees rate them. My sense is it comes out of a sense of humility. What do you think?

Brian Brandt: I think sometimes that is absolutely true. I think that sometimes even that perpetual humility will cause us to kind of believe that about ourselves, even though we've just been humble about it. But when we really stop and we really see those positives and see those strengths and recognize that we can be humble about them, but yet still use them to the advantage of our people at our departments and our courts, then it can go a long way.

Michael Siegel: There are also potential problems when people take a strength too far. How can this play out?

Brian Brandt: Yeah. This is one that has been fun to watch in some of our trainings. I often see the light bulb go on for people when I lead a training on a topic like this and as we do a quick and simple exercise. One of the things I do is I simply have people write their name on one side of a notecard and then one of their greatest strengths on the other side. To

your point earlier, Michael, sometimes people kind of give me pushback or odd looks because of that humility. I really have them to think about what are some of their strengths. But then I have them trade the cards around the room so that they don't have their own. Then I have people write down potential weaknesses and challenges that correspond to that strength.

So it's not about the person at all. Really the name is on the card only so that it gets back to the right person. Someone may write something like I'm very outgoing. Well, that's a great strength and it certainly has a lot of value. But people with that strength are likely to have more words to speak than the average person and more comfortable speaking out to express their interest. When that's taken too far, it could be perceived as vain, conceited, narcissistic, controlling, or micromanaging.

I coach people with those strengths to watch for opportunities to ask open-ended questions of others to really get people talking and be close to proportionate with the size of the group in their conversations. For example, if they're with three other people, aim to speak about 25 percent of the time. That's why those things that they can do, they can recognize that strength and they can look and go, okay, how could it be perceived or even how might it play out in reality.

Another one I see when we do this exercise is patience. You know, that's a great quality. But taken too far or not used in the right circumstances, that can be or even be perceived as people that are slow to make decisions, detached, disinterested or lacking motivation. The strength of being very outgoing or being very patient, I mean those are really valuable. That's maybe how we're wired but sometimes the reality and the perception can be different from the others, especially those that aren't like ourselves.

Michael Siegel: Right. So in the example you used, they were getting feedback from other people about the potential downside of a strength. How can we in general become more attuned to our personal blind spots?

Brian Brandt: Yeah. That's the heart of the book, Michael. In the book, we provide 11 strategies. Let me hit up on a couple of those. The first one is building our feedback team - really those people that we work most closely with. Fostering relationships that lead to trust that really leads to open and honest communication. So I've been on teams like that before where really we all were getting along. We were all connected. We believed in each other and we believed the best of each other. When we saw something, good or bad, that we thought others weren't believing, we would talk about those.

People would tell me things that I might not see. Because of that I could address that.

When there's that openness and honesty, we can really be in that process of continual improvement. Let's take the relationship between a court unit executive and a deputy court unit executive. You know I would ask them, have they fostered a relationship that really exudes trust where they can openly say to one another, I saw you do this yesterday and I suggest next time you try it like this. I think you'll be more successful. If so, and it goes both ways, they will both be more successful. It will carry over to many aspects of the court. That's one way.

So just that feedback team, getting people to feel comfortable sharing with you and maybe that's when asked or maybe that's impromptu. Research has shown and what we've seen is learn about non-verbal communication and act upon it. We need to be able to read the facial expressions, the body language, others' positioning to pick up on how people are really feeling about our leadership, our communication, our plans or our initiatives. Non-verbal communication is raw. So someone who may say one thing to us with their words but their non-verbal communication can give us the real truth.

There's been times -- there was a gentleman that I had on my team a few years ago who was a doctoral candidate. One day

as we were wrapping up, it was late in the day on Friday, as I said some things to him to kind of recap the week, there were just some little, just quick little look he gave. I mean it was literally a fifth of a second but I picked up on it. I was able to follow up on it and say, you know what, I feel like maybe you've misunderstood me. Tell me what you were thinking.

Because I followed up on it and I initially saw it, then I was able to get to the root. Honestly, he probably would have had a little bit of a challenging, frustrating weekend if I wouldn't have done that. But because of that non-verbal communication, I had miscommunicated something to him. But I saw through his non-verbal communication that I'd made a mistake and I needed to verify it and check on it.

The reality also is non-verbal communication is not a hundred percent. I kind of had a funny situation last, I guess, it was two weeks ago. I was at a leadership conference as a panelist. A woman asked each of us what we were doing to instill leadership in the next generation. Right as she asked that, I winced. I had this painful look on my face. But what had happened was I'd gotten a really bad cramp in my hamstring right as she asked that question. So my non-verbal communication was saying that I was really uncomfortable. But really I wasn't uncomfortable with the question; I was

uncomfortable with this pain in my hamstring. And so in this I was able to explain myself.

We just need to remember that when we see some incongruent communication non-verbally, then we need to follow up on it and we need to ask because maybe what we were saying or we were doing was not perceived in the way that we really desire. When we see that consistently, it's probably something that we need to follow up on and maybe a true blind spot in our lives.

Michael Siegel: Right. Hamstrings don't respond well to initiatives, do they? They come when they come.

Brian Brandt: That's right.

Michael Siegel: Yeah. I want to go back to something you talked about earlier, a feedback team. You used the example of a court unit executive and a deputy. All of this is meant to increase the self-awareness of the leader but it also takes great courage and trust on the part of the team. Can you explain how we generate that trust?

Brian Brandt: Yeah. You know that courage and trust is significant. Significantly, especially on the trust aspect, it really is a thing where I think it starts with relationship. When we don't have a relationship, then it's really difficult to build that trust. So sometimes when I'm working with teams of leaders and managers, I will ask them to write down as many things as they know about their direct reports. What usually

happens is they know a lot about some of their direct reports and they don't know much about others. I'd tell you that's an opportunity. That's an opportunity to go back and start to have more open and honest communication and just foster that because it's nearly impossible to have good, long-standing trust without that relationship.

But then, too, you bring up courage, I think it does take great courage oftentimes for us to really do that self-examination. Oftentimes, it would be my hope that we see things that we don't like about ourselves and then we act upon them. What I've seen though is while it does take great courage, the rewards are great. The rewards in our careers, in our departments, and in our relationships are dramatic. I think it's great to have that courage so we really can have that impact.

Michael Siegel: Brian, complacency can also cause blind spots sometimes with actually serious consequences. For example, those who ignore warnings about an impending natural disaster, you've written about this in your book. Help us understand how complacency impacts behavior.

Brian Brandt: Yes. You know the natural disaster example is at least really good for our part of the country because we regularly have tornados here. Over time when the National Weather Service puts out a tornado watch, it really doesn't

heighten anyone's senses very much. They really don't do anything much differently. Too often, even tornado warnings and warning sirens can be ignored. We make that comparison to where, you know, what we are getting these signals from people or were flat out told about things. And then people say, you know what, that's just the way I am. Everybody else is going to have to deal with it.

When that happens, talk about eroding trust. It's a situation where people just don't want to be a part of a team. They don't want to engage in initiatives. They don't want to work on projects with these people. Oftentimes, it's just real gradual because sometimes nobody really told them these things. Maybe because of their family background or their experience or their personality, they don't even do anything about it.

A good example is there was a gentleman that I did some executive coaching with that told me he was really struggling with one of his key employees. This was an employee who had been very successful and quite frankly had a skillset that was tremendously valuable to the organization and would be very difficult to replace. After much discussion, we determined that I would sit in on one of their meetings as a consultant. I quickly realized that my client was just completely self-sabotaging that relationship. A few points that I can recall - he had a typed agenda for the meeting but he didn't share it

with the other person, with the employee, so it was just something where he knew what the plan was but his employee didn't.

But here's a few things that were really kind of wild, Michael. At one point, he pointed his finger at the employee and really kind of stuck his finger in a condescending way. At one point, he said, you're wrong, when it really wasn't a right or wrong situation. It was just a difference in a point of view. This was the clincher. At one point he slammed his hand down on the table in anger. When the employee left and we debriefed the meeting, he didn't know he had done any of those things. He was completely blind to how he had just really sabotaged this relationship and any chance of trust. It was because nobody had pointed those things out to him and he was just completely unaware.

So I think there is that complacency a lot of times where because of the background of our experiences and the organizations we came from and the bosses that we had, we just never saw things and were never confronted or challenged on things. My co-author, Dr. Ashley Kutach, she oftentimes at our book signing, she will often write, learn something new today. I think that's a good mantra for fighting complacency. That if we're in that mindset of doing something new each and every day, then we can kind of break out of that.

Michael Siegel: Absolutely. I remember doing a 360 with a court unit. One of the things that a deputy chief learned through the 360 was that he pointed his finger at people. Just like you were saying, he was unaware of it. It came through. It was ten people who said it so how can you deny it?

Brian Brandt: Right. I was going to say, for those of us who are more relational in nature and pretty in tune, those things just seem so blatant, yet to your example, just completely unaware.

Michael Siegel: Yes. Brian, we've been talking mostly about individual blind spots. You and your colleague argue that organizations can also have blind spots. What type of blind spots might a federal court agency have?

Brian Brandt: I was speaking at a federal executive board training not long ago. The percentage of federal employees who are eligible to retire now or will be very soon is extremely high. In this gathering, I asked for a show of hands for how many in the room were actively working a succession plan. One hand went up, Michael. There were 250 federal leaders in the room and one hand went up. Despite the fact that we all know we've got a lot of the federal employees that are ready to retire or could retire tomorrow. So I think succession planning is a blind spot for many of our federal court agencies.

Another one that I would share is, I think, IT and just the use of technology might be another. Because many of us have been doing it one way or the same way for a long time, not willing or open to looking at the technology and what it could do for us and how it could make us both more efficient and more effective. I think that could be a significant blind spot for federal court agencies.

Another one I see pretty often in these kinds of situations, especially in light of lack of financial control, is staff recruiting. Our courts can't just go out and create a new product to generate revenue. They work with what they're given. With that, many leaders won't consider other ways to create a great culture. They'll kind of minimize their ability to go out and hire the best and the brightest because they don't feel like they have the funds to do it. Certainly, I would say, there are a lot of things that make a workplace attractive. Because of that, we can look beyond the finances to really go, okay, what can we do to create a great culture that has great buzz and has people talking about it? When openings come up, people really want to be a part of it.

Those would be three organizational blind spots that I might suggest for federal court agencies.

Michael Siegel: So what steps can we take to minimize those blind spots?

Brian Brandt: I think with organizations, some steps that we could take are strategic planning. Strategic planning will often identify and help an agency to really understand what the issues are. Again, to our point earlier, some of those may be strengths and some of those may be weaknesses but we can really identify, okay, what are the ones that are most significant during this season of our time and our operation? And what can we do over the course of the next three years to really work on those? I think strategic planning is a great way to both identify and address organizational blind spots.

Also, I think you guys offer some great resources. Really looking at the resources that the FJC provides to compare and contrast what our organizations are doing compared to another, those can be really helpful. And then similarly, I would say at the FJC conferences, get together with a couple of colleagues and honestly discuss what is going on. Certainly, the keynotes and the breakout sessions are great for helping us be aware of new items and new ways to think of things. And then taking some time when those sessions aren't going on to meet with people. Maybe meet with people that are in similar-sized departments but then also look at some bigger ones and go, okay, what are you all doing? Those are some steps I think court leaders can take organizationally.

Personally, I would say, really build that feedback team. Really consciously think about who do I want giving me that honest and open feedback and really asking them for it. Really seek to know ourselves, our strengths and our weaknesses. Understand those non-verbal cues and clues that we're getting. And then also look for a pattern for when things don't go as we thought they would. That means when things go better than expected or worse than expected, either way. And then really stop and think about, okay, why did that happen, what was my part in it, how did I contribute again to the good or the bad. Those are things that will help us to take some steps towards identifying and addressing our blind spots.

Michael Siegel: I think be prepared to hear the feedback, right?

Brian Brandt: Oh, yeah.

Michael Siegel: Which also takes a great deal of courage.

Brian Brandt: Absolutely. The way we receive it makes all the difference on whether people are going to want to continue to do that or not. In fact, one of the things I will often tell people and I try to make a practice myself is, when people give me good open and honest feedback, man, I try to reward it. I mean it may be as simple as praise and a thank you or a handwritten thank you note within a few days. Other times, I've given out some gift cards. I said, you know what, that piece of

information you gave me made a really big difference in my life. I'd like to just say thank you with this gift card. Because then people will go, wow, he really does care about that. He really does value that. That wasn't just thrown to the trash. Absolutely, how we receive it is huge.

Michael Siegel: Excellent. Brian, is there anything else you'd like to tell our audience?

Brian Brandt: There is. We probably all heard people say I'm my own worst critic. We'd even said it ourselves. I'm okay with that as long as we couple that with being our most supportive advocate. We've got to watch that self-talk and we've got to make sure that we put it in the right perspective. So when our self-talk is telling us something, I think we need to ask follow-up questions and really say, is that really true, or what supporting evidence is there for that, or do I have information that disputes that? Because I certainly know that for myself, there are times where that self-talk has me headed in a direction. When I can pause and really push back on myself and go, you know what, is that really true? If it is true, well, then it may be a blind spot and something I need to address. If it's not true, then I need to not believe it and I need to make sure and have the accurate and right perception and move forward.

I'd close with this. Identifying our blind spots opens us up to so many new possibilities. I've seen it change countless people's relationships, organizations, and trajectory. Certainly, that is true for me. So identifying and addressing our blind spots is a great investment that I think makes a real difference in our own lives as well as all of those people that we're around both in our work and in our volunteer roles, and in our families.

Michael, thanks again for the opportunity to be on your podcast. I really do appreciate it.

Michael Siegel: Thank you very much and thanks for your powerful insights and your terrific work.

Lori Murphy: Thanks, Michael and thanks to our listening audience as well. If you're interested in hearing more episodes of *Executive Edge*, visit the *Executive Education* page on fjc.dcn and click or tap on *Executive Edge* podcast.

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Executive Edge is produced by Jennifer Richter and directed by Craig Bowden. I'm Lori Murphy. Thanks for listening, until next time.

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